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APHRODITE RECLINING

Ramona Reeves

The country club was too grandiose for a baby shower. Never mind they had painted over the plantation-white exterior years ago with coffee-stain beige. Inside, the vestiges of old Mobile remained in paintings boasting grand white houses with bright pink clumps of Alabama shrubs and fountains colored a perfect patina. The paintings offered no hint of the slightly noxious smell of boiling cabbage that spewed from the paper mill near the bay. Such odors rarely breached the club, especially in spring when a wall of azaleas guarded the grounds and made beauty the price of admission.

Corrine stood on the club's portico to avoid the pre-shower bustle inside. Three painted iron benches, there only for show, left her no alternative but to lean against a pale, Doric column. Comfort had never been a priority at the club, although it was adding a meditation garden. For this purpose, two heaps of crushed white granite pimpled the blacktopped parking lot. As far as Corrine was concerned, the club was wasting money on a passing, new-age fad. She would always prefer the tennis courts bounded by ambitious jasmine, the pool where she had spent summers dunking her brother, or even the gardening shed she'd snuck into with friends to smoke Virginia Slims.

When the door to the club opened, the protruding globe of Sammie Jo's waist was the first thing Corrine saw. Her partner's pink and white maternity dress made her look proper, as though she belonged. "Your mom wants to know where to set the flowers," Sammie Jo said as she drew closer.

"You're better with those things."

"Yeah," Sammie Jo replied, "but she won't listen to me."

Corrine gently squeezed Sammie Jo's elbow, but only for the time it took a few leaves to shake free in the late March wind. Her mother did not listen to many people and would never listen to Sammie Jo. Corrine felt the urge to soothe her in a more substantial way, but kissing her, even circumspectly on the cheek, was not appropriate at the club. On one point Corrine and her mother agreed: Displaying

too much emotion made a mess of things, especially in public.

"You got dust or something on your jacket," Sammie Jo said.

Corrine twisted the tail around and swiped at a white smear the length of a dollar bill, perhaps residue from a recent whitewash or dust from the pile of rocks set aside for the meditation garden.

"Let me try," Sammie Jo offered.

"No, I've got it."

Sammie Jo sighed and retreated.

That morning Corrine had interviewed the fourth possible nanny. The interviewee had folded her stubby hands into her lap and said she believed in walking in others' shoes but "wasn't rightly sure" about walking in Corrine and Sammie Jo's. None of the other candidates had taken issue with them—it was, after all, the twenty-first century—but one had twitched her lips oddly during her interview, one had used the bathroom without washing her hands, and another had not shown up at all. With Sammie Jo nearly eight months along, Corrine worried she would not find a suitable match. "Nobody but you cares about a nanny," Sammie Jo told her that morning, "And your family won't like you a bit better for it."

Corrine swiped again at the white dust on her jacket. "Are we still in agreement about offering Babbie the job?" Corrine thought it might be nice for Sammie Jo's best friend to be around their house more often. She was a good eight years or so older than either of them but a little life experience wasn't a bad thing.

Sammie Jo reached between her breasts, pulled out a peppermint and unwrapped it. She chewed them in lieu of smoking, but hiding them in her bra was tacky. When Corrine had expressed as much, Sammie Jo had immediately plucked a mint from her bra and popped it into her mouth.

"Asking Babbie to work for us feels weird," Sammie Jo said. "Especially as a nanny. I still think daycare is fine. It's what normal people do, you know?"

They had discussed daycare dozens of times. Corrine would not toss her child into a sandbox of dirty and strange children, but saying so only made her sound pretentious. It was true that neither of her parents had exhibited much in the way

of daily affection during her childhood, but honestly, the idea of her mother warming milk and reading a bedtime story seemed as preposterous as world peace. Her own nanny, a straight-backed woman with a penchant for Mahalia Jackson and Sly and the Family Stone, had taught Corrine what her parents and St. Francis Episcopal School could not: how to dance with her whole body, how to lie on the grass and smell spring, how to spread peanut butter evenly on bread, and most importantly, how to live among people who would never quite see you. Corrine believed her own mother had understood her shortcomings well enough to hire a nanny, which in itself had been an act of love. Although Corrine believed herself far more affectionate than either of her parents, she saw that a nanny could give her child what she could not, the experience of another world.

“Do whatever you want,” Sammie Jo said, “but don’t tell Babbie it was my idea.”

From the club’s entrance, her sister Pru leaned out in a sleeveless baby-blue dress embroidered along the hem. “Mother’s going to lose it if you don’t come inside.”

Several guests had already gathered. Corrine watched as their eyes briefly noted her and Sammie Jo’s entrance without any interruption in their polite chatter. In the room reserved for the occasion hung three paintings of Aphrodite in standing, seated, and reclining positions, each doused in perfectly centered overhead lighting. The scantily clad figure had endeared the paintings to Corrine’s brother and his friends as teenagers. She recalled blushing, without knowing why, the first time she’d seen the love goddess trio.

“You’re dirty,” Pru said to Corrine. Her sister bent and brushed the back of her jacket.

“I’m aware of that. I’ll fix it after I help Mom.”

Pru tossed her yellow, flat-ironed hair over one shoulder and pulled a chair toward Sammie Jo. “You shouldn’t be standing so much, sweetie.”

Corrine could not remove the jacket because the shirt underneath was wrinkled. Sammie Jo had forgotten to pick up the dry cleaning the day before and there had been no time to buy a shirt that morning. “We can’t keep you clean,” Corrine’s mother used to tell her as a child, but the problem wasn’t Corrine so much as the clothing supplied to her: sundresses, white shorts, frilly pastel skirts, and patent

leather shoes. Only her brother Trip was allowed polo shirts and high-tops, and he wasn't about to share them with his older sister. She remembered one Christmas when she was about ten, and according to her mother, growing too old for tomboy shenanigans. She tore at Christmas paper and opened boxes as though she were being timed. In the last box, she hoped to find a slingshot or maybe a Walkman to play her tapes. Instead, she found hot-pink panties and a matching camisole. "You'll be a lady soon," her mother had said.

With cousins, grandparents, aunts, and uncles as witnesses, her brother had snatched the panties and slung them onto the Christmas tree. Pru and her father laughed while her mother nabbed her brother's arm and escorted him to his room. In the end, Corrine had worn the pink monstrosities and the skirts and dresses that followed, but she thought of them as costumes, unlike the neutral-colored pantsuit, cotton briefs, and businesswoman bob she wore to work and to the baby shower. Sometimes she felt she was neither man nor woman, despite her feminine upbringing and its insistence on her becoming a connoisseur of beauty and a vehicle for family continuity. She was not what she was supposed to be, not what anyone wanted except Sammie Jo and maybe the soon-to-be child.

When her mother, who was circulating dutifully among the guests, finally made her way to Corrine, she said, "Isn't it nice you could take a little time for yourself outdoors when the party's about to start?"

Her mother wore a white suit with pearls and ivory pumps, her smile whitened to match. She pointed to a large round table, easily the size of a trampoline, where a confident spray of spider lilies, irises, and chrysanthemums reached for the ceiling. She asked Corrine, "Do you think the bouquet should go next to the guest book?"

"It looks fine where it is." Her mother had gone to too much fuss. Even Corrine's old Tulane buddies were more accustomed to barbeques and beer.

"We thought the gift table and guest book could go in the corner," Pru said.

A black waiter dressed in a white jacket, white button-down shirt, and a black bow tie stood trophy-like at the back of the room. So much of Corrine's early life had been black and white this way, particular people performing roles that seemed almost God-given. That is, until the first black doctor sought membership and was turned away. Many longtime staff had deserted the club in protest, forcing it to update its membership and hiring policies. But Corrine felt sure two women seeking a family-membership would not produce the same stir. If anything, it

would only strengthen the club and the staff's resolve to keep such people out.

"Everything's perfect," Sammie Jo told Pru.

Sammie Jo was always trying to agree with her family, a useless attempt at gaining their approval. "It doesn't matter where things go," Corrine said.

"Wouldn't that be a fine how-do-you-do," her mother replied, "just plopping things down wherever we please."

The waiter moved a table to the corner, as instructed by Pru. She thanked him and he disappeared from the room.

Although Corrine and Sammie Jo had been a couple for three years, it was only Sammie Jo's second time at the club, and Corrine could tell by the way she was clasping her hands—trying not to bite her fingernails—that she felt nervous. Corrine inched closer and whispered "relax" into Sammie Jo's ear.

"You, too," she countered.

As Corrine hoped, Sammie Jo's shoulders relaxed, but she would need to learn to manage better in the world of her mother. She would not stop at a baby shower. As soon as she'd gotten used to the idea of the pregnancy, in fact, her mother had insisted on James as the baby's name. "It's good to remember who we are," she'd said, "and having a namesake will mean the world to your father."

What meant the most to Corrine's father, however, was his legal practice, golf and tending his roses the way some men tended their families.

Corrine swiped at the back of her jacket in one last attempt to remove whatever had taken hold, but she stood too close to a table and knocked a glass of water onto one pants' leg.

"Corrine!" her mother said. The waiter produced a towel from his back pocket and mechanically wiped the floor. Another waiter—this one white—entered with a mop, a bucket and a handful of dishtowels. When they finished wiping and mopping, the two men bowed and subtracted themselves from the group of women. Corrine made up her mind to give each an extra tip when her mother wasn't looking.

"I think some of your little friends have arrived," her mother called out. She had referred to Sammie Jo as her "little friend" until sixteen months ago when they'd moved in together, and then, until the pregnancy, she had refused to mention Sammie Jo at all.

Corrine never imagined she would fall for the brave teller who had asked her, a vice president, to lunch nor had she foreseen the drinks that followed, but she could no longer recall those evenings without thinking of how they'd led to Sammie Jo's place, a one-bedroom apartment on the side of town more populated with pin oaks and pine trees than live oaks and magnolias. At first, Corrine had accepted the invitations out of loneliness, but later she went because Sammie Jo's easy smile built its own museum in her mind, a place where she could and could not breathe.

Rumors had circulated at work and Corrine's boss told her, "She will need to find a job at another bank, and you will need to show more discretion. Not have her showing up here as much."

Sammie Jo stomped around their house when Corrine told her everything the bank president had said, and although she eventually acquiesced, Corrine knew she would never fully see that people destroyed what they could not understand.

After rumors died down, Corrine's boss congratulated her. "You dodged a bullet," he said. "You'll have a fine career, provided you don't flaunt your lifestyle."

When Corrine returned from drying her pants in the ladies' room, she found Babbie and Marti standing at the entrance to the shower. The two friends had played softball with Sammie Jo for years and had gotten to know Corrine after she joined the team. She was better at tennis but liked how relaxed she felt at the softball park.

Babbie and Marti, big-eyed, tugged each other's sleeves and pointed at objects, as if the club were Versailles. Babbie held a box the size of a diaper bag, which Corrine hoped it wasn't. Wrapped in rainbow-striped paper, half-inch ribbons of yellow, red, and orange girded their gift. The ribbons finished in a mound of ringlets enough to fill a punchbowl.

"We wrapped it ourselves," Marti told Corrine, "but the first kid's a big deal. You

can't leave details to chance."

Corrine smiled, even though the comment made little sense. Sammie Jo showed up and hugged the pair and then latched on to one of Corrine's arms. "What an amazing gift, don't you think?"

"Very amazing," Corrine said. She was trying to sound sincere, but Sammie Jo's fingers tightening around her arm signaled she had failed. If the gift weren't bad enough, Babbie was wearing black rhinestone earrings the length of diaper pins and a black cocktail dress better suited to an evening event. Only Marti, decked out in the colors of an elementary school bulletin board, outdid her. Not that Corrine cared what they wore, but her mother would notice.

And notice she did. After introducing herself, her mother rested one curled hand beneath her chin, clearly contemplating the tacky wrapping. A lavender tag as big as a baking mitt hung off the side. Her mother read the inscription. "Here's to a little Knockoff."

"Knockers is the name of our softball team," Sammie Jo told Corrine's mother.

"I see." Her mother called to a waiter. "Could you place this gift with the others?" When she returned her gaze to the group, Babbie said, "You need to come to a game. I don't make it that often, with two jobs and kids and all, but Sammie Jo's a heck of a pitcher."

Corrine tried to imagine her mother seated in Capris and espadrilles on a dusty, ketchup-stained bleacher at the softball park. She imagined her searching the stands for people she knew. Corrine wondered what she would think of Babbie's daughter, who came to almost every game with her black boyfriend. Would her mother sit beside Babbie's son who'd just been released from the Atmore prison on good behavior? Issues aside, would she see how they loved Babbie enough to watch her play, enough to show up?

"I called in sick to be here," Babbie told her hosts. "No way I was gonna miss seeing the inside of this club."

"Well," Corrine's mother replied, "what's a little fib for a good cause?"

"I told her everything in here's probably just like everywhere else," Marti said. "Made in China."

"The Chinese are certainly productive," her mother said and drew close to Marti and squeezed her arm. "We're so glad you're both here."

Corrine never imagined her mother warming to Marti or Babbie. She had started to tell Marti about the history of the club and its art collections, but her mother's gesture had interfered. Sammie Jo had insisted on inviting Marti to put Babbie at ease, that and she felt sorry for Marti and her sad-sap life of working nights at a truck stop and putting up with an abusive boyfriend that Sammie Jo likened to a Billy goat.

After her mother led the two women to their seats, Sammie Jo whispered, "I know their gift wrapping doesn't jive with the rest of the fancy gifts, but it's not a big deal."

"Jibe," Corrine said.

"That's what I said."

"You said jive."

"Whatever. Let's just have fun, okay? Sometimes you're worse than your mother. And anyway, she's not that bad."

Corrine noticed several guests watching them and said nothing more. She wanted to shout she was nothing like her mother, certainly not worse. Sammie Jo only dared accuse her of such a thing because Corrine would never stoop to showing her agitation in public. This partner of hers, from a family nobody had heard of, knew exactly how to jab her, whether or not she knew how to jibe.

"Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves and say how we're related to our guests of honor," Corrine's mother announced. "I'll start. Obviously, I'm Jayne, grandmother-to-be, but I will never be old enough to be called Granny."

She leaned toward Corrine and laughed. Her mother's best friend, Mimi Radcliffe, introduced herself next as they went around the table counterclockwise. Sara Slater, wife of the president at the bank where Corrine worked, sat on the other side of Mimi. Then came Pru, Corrine's first cousin Trudy, two of Corrine's friends from her Tulane days, Babbie and Marti from The Knockers, Sammie Jo's mother,

and finally, Sammie Jo and her. This gathering of women represented the hodgepodge of Corrine's life and fell short of who and what she had hoped to be. She understood the unkindness and hypocrisy of this thought, but nonetheless, felt something had been lost.

Corrine noticed Marti and Sammie Jo's mother staring at the full place setting next to the first course, cantaloupe and blueberries. "So much silverware," Corrine piped up, "It's a waste, really." This pronouncement gained their attention. "But as usual I'll just work from the outside in'."

Sammie Jo's mother laughed. "Thank the Lord I'm not washing the dishes."

"Misbehave," Babbie said, "and see where you end up."

When a second course of raspberry sorbet followed, Marti said, "Dessert before lunch. I like this place."

"It gets rid of the taste of what you just ate," Babbie responded. "They call it cleansing your palate."

Corrine liked that Babbie knew this information.

"They can cleanse me anytime they like," Marti said.

Mimi Radcliffe dabbed her lips with a napkin. "If only it were that easy."

The Tulane friends laughed.

Sammie Jo's mother ignored them and told Marti, "If you want some cleansing that's not about palates, you're still invited to church. Any Sunday."

"Thanks, Mrs. Kenner," Marti replied, "but don't save me a seat."

Corrine wanted to say Marti's sentiment went double for her but allowed the moment to pass. Sammie Jo's mother was a Super Bowl contender in church attendance and valued likeminded believers contending for the same eternal prize. Sammie Jo's mother was nothing like her father, a Baptist preacher who told stories and fished. Not that his daughter's choice of partners pleased him, so much as he'd agreed to let it be. Every Tuesday he and Sammie Jo met for breakfast at a fast-food place on Highway 90. "Couldn't love her any less," he'd once confided to

Corrine. "And maybe I love her more." Corrine had tried to imagine her dad saying such a thing, but make-believe wasn't her strength.

The third course of Caesar salad with fried capers and freshly grated Parmesan cheese inspired a little clap from Babbie. "I'd never leave this place if I was a member," she said.

Corrine smiled at the idea of seeing Babbie more frequently. Nannies often brought children to the club. "Maybe you can stay," she said.

Babbie's smile disappeared. Did she think Corrine was flirting? "I only meant," she said, "that maybe you could find a job that would allow you to spend time here."

"You find it and I'll take it," Babbie said.

Mimi Radcliffe overheard this comment. "I'm sure you'd be lovely behind the bar, dear."

"I've worked at enough bars," Babbie replied, "to turn a septic tank to wine. None as classy as the one here, but I can tell you, drunk is drunk."

Corrine started to ask Babbie about her experience working at bars until a waiter reached an arm between her and Babbie's side of the table. He served plates of boneless chicken breast, rice pilaf, and broccoli almandine.

Mimi stood and called for a toast. "To the new mothers and a new world." Iced tea and wine glasses clinked.

"That was so nice of her," Sammie Jo whispered to Corrine after Mimi sat down.

Not really, Corrine thought. A new world meant the old one wasn't an option. She'd been promised more where her family was concerned and hated that she cared about people who would never completely accept her. They only cared about their first grandson. Under the table, she reached for Sammie Jo's hand.

A waiter began refilling water glasses. Babbie caught his attention and asked if he might bring some mustard for the chicken. She said it needed a little something. At this complaint, Corrine noted her mother and Mimi's raised eyebrows. Corrine didn't blame Babbie for doctoring the food; the club routinely overcooked the grilled chicken, rendering it the consistency of the rubber tip on a turkey baster.

Corrine had requested pork tenderloin a week earlier, but her mother had changed it to chicken. "Pork is too heavy for lunch," she'd said.

The waiter returned minutes later with a small jar of honey dijon.

"How cute is this?" Babbie said. "It's barely larger than a spool of thread."

Marti and Sammie Jo's mother agreed the jar was cute.

The Tulane friends asked Babbie where she had gone to school. "BC Rain," she said. "And you?"

Both friends said they had attended an Episcopal prep school. They meant to tease out where Babbie had gone to college, and at that moment Corrine disliked them both. Despite Babbie's lack of refinement, Corrine believed in her ability to raise her son. She would need more direction at first, but Babbie was certainly sharp and energetic. A good choice overall. Plus, she might enjoy the standard hours, better pay, and connections she would make with people like Sara Slater, Pru, and Trudy. Although as far as Corrine could tell, Pru and Trudy—both engaged to young doctors—were paying little attention to Babbie, or for that matter the questions of the Tulane friends, and spent most of the luncheon chatting about wedding vendors.

Months earlier, shortly after her sister's engagement, Corrine had gone to her parents' house to tell them about the pregnancy. The house was quiet when she entered. A portrait of her grandmother cloaked in a blue gown hung over the fireplace, a fireplace that rarely saw use in the sweltering humidity that consumed Mobile much of the year. She poured herself a whiskey from the bar behind the English-inspired sofa and shortly after found her parents in the rose garden. Her father was pruning and nipping buds and her mother was nestled on a swing and reading a book.

"A little early in the day, don't you think?" her mother said when she saw Corrine with a drink. "Jim, look what your daughter's doing." She patted the seat next to her on the canopied swing.

"I'll stand," Corrine said.

Her father briefly glanced her way and smiled. "A little can't hurt. Takes the edge off, right sweetie?"

She sipped from her drink, then announced, "Sammie Jo is pregnant."

Her father lowered his trimming shears and faced her. Her mother closed her book. A clear sunny day surrounded them. Roses everywhere. Corsages ready to be plucked and worn in celebration. Corrine sipped and waited. She feared their likely response but could not shake the hope of a happy family.

"Congratulations to your friend," her mother finally said.

"Yes, of course," her father agreed.

She gulped the rest of her drink to loosen her words but only managed, "The Iceberg roses look nice."

Her father said, "Yes, a few blemishes, though" and laid his shears on a bench. "You'll have to excuse me, sweetie," he added, "I'm parched."

As swift as that, Corrine was alone with her mother, who once again patted the seat beside her. "Your father won't be back."

Corrine's words finally shot into her throat. "We went to New Orleans," she said, "and used my egg and our softball coach's sperm. The coach has been like a father to Sammie Jo."

Her mother placed the book onto the empty seat beside her and yanked her sunglasses from her gray-blue eyes. "Dear God, Corrine."

"I thought you might be happy," Corrine answered. "I saved you thousands in wedding costs." She'd always understood a wedding would not be acceptable, whether or not it was legal.

Her mother's eyes grew glassy. "Who are you?" Her defeated tone wilted and silenced any response from Corrine. "I need a drink," she said before excusing herself as well.

Corrine relinquished her standing position and glided on the swing. The scented petals of a nearby dogwood tree infused the air with sweetness. Despite the

garden's perfection, only Sammie Jo, with her leafless potted plants and pinecone collection, could make things right.

For dessert her mother asked the two waiters to cut slices of the white, two-tiered cake decorated with blue candy bears. The waiters carried out her wishes, poured coffee from silver carafes, and placed bowls of brown cubes on the table.

"A person could get used to this," Marti said.

"A person could indeed," Sara Slater responded.

Neither Marti nor Babbie could know that Sara Slater was used to a cleaning lady, a cook, and a good many things, including pills to sleep and frequent spa vacations that left her depressed and distant from her husband. Occasionally, when she stopped by the office to see him she also stopped by to see Corrine. Sara Slater seemed to have few friends and always asked Corrine to lunch. Aware she could not always refuse, Corrine had obliged on two occasions. The weight of Sara Slater's problems—her inability to bear a child, her obsession with shopping, and her whining about Corrine's boss—annoyed Corrine. She had invited the woman to the shower solely because she was the boss' wife. The woman was an adult and needed to realize things could be worse. Sara Slater's cage was of her own making.

Corrine's mother motioned to the waiter to clear the dessert plates and move the gifts to the main table. Corrine and Sammie Jo took turns unwrapping them.

"Watch those ribbons," Marti said. "However many you tear is how many youngins' you'll have."

Marti's comment explained why she and Babbie had tied their gift in triplicate. When Sammie Jo finally wrangled the stiff ribbon free, inside was a puffy white-and-green quilt appliquéd with a mother and baby giraffe.

"Some ladies at the Catholic bazaar make them," Babbie said.

Sammie Jo rubbed her face in the quilt then hugged it to her chest. Babbie got up and wrapped her arms around her, followed by Marti who kissed Sammie Jo on the cheek. Corrine felt a little jealous of the three women. She ran her hands over the quilt's soft white-and-green squares and could tell by her mother's smile that

it was a unanimous hit. The baby would be wrapped in something authentic and handmade. If she could teach him anything, Corrine hoped it would be the art of authenticity, and yet, despite the differences in their education, Corrine suspected Sammie Jo and her friends had a knack for this art form that she might never master.

All that might change, of course, if her mother had her way. It had taken her less than a month to show up at the bank after learning about the baby. Over lunch they'd chatted about Corrine's job, her mother's social activities, and the weather. Then, as her mother was paying, she'd said matter-of-factly, "Maybe we should send Samantha Jo back to school for her bachelor's. I'm sure she doesn't aspire to be a bank teller all her life."

Corrine had clenched her jaw and tried to smile. Her mother was offering Sammie Jo a way in, even if she was doing it by pointing out what her partner lacked. "Yes," Corrine agreed, "especially with a child."

"Time for the grandmas' gifts," Sammie Jo said. She and Corrine had saved their mothers' presents to open last. Sammie Jo ripped the multicolored paper from her mother's gift to reveal a cardboard box stamped with potato chip logos.

"It's the only box I had," her mother said, "Anyway, it what's inside that counts."

Corrine's mother, being polite she supposed, smiled and nodded. Her mother's gift was wrapped in expensive white paper embossed with bunnies that might have hopped there from a classic children's book.

Sammie Jo pulled out diapers, a small white teddy bear, and a blue-and-white outfit with a little white cap.

"To wear to church," Sammie Jo's mother said.

"The outfit will be nice for the christening," Corrine said.

Sammie Jo's mother turned and showed her daughter the whites of her eyes. Her idea of baptism was submersion, but Corrine refused to see any child of hers forcibly submerged in water, even for a few seconds. But that was the crux, wasn't it? Sammie Jo's people grew into adults who gave their entire bodies to the water while Corrine's people did everything they could to avoid getting wet.

Corrine opened the last gift. Inside was a check for \$500 and a yellowed, plastic rattle half the size of her hand.

"It was yours, remember?" her mother said. "And before that, it was mine."

Corrine smiled in the reserved manner of her upbringing. She loved the gift. How was it possible to both love and despise tradition? She was not equipped to live in a completely new world, nor able to live in the old one.

"Only a mom could give something so nice," Babbie said. She shook the rattle, which produced a gentle tinkling similar to the notes of a music box.

Corrine's mother smiled genuinely. For thirty-two years, Corrine had studied the intricate movements of her mother's face for joy or displeasure, sadness or approval. Maybe the shower had not been such a bad idea. With that thought came the urge to hold Sammie Jo, who had endured so much for her. When this partner of hers smiled, there was no denying her goodness. Watching her now, Corrine did the unthinkable in front of all these women and ran her hand slowly over Sammie Jo's curly blond hair, then pulled her close and held her for a few seconds. And for that instant, Corrine was Aphrodite reclining, Aphrodite at her best.

Outside the club the women began to disperse, saying what a lovely time they'd had and all the rest. Corrine leaned toward Sammie Jo and whispered it was time, and Sammie Jo sighed and nodded. But before Corrine could ask, Babbie said, "I feel honored y'all invited me. One of my ex-husbands says people aren't this nice without a reason, but I'm gonna say this proves him wrong."

Babbie would have been invited to the shower regardless because she was Sammie Jo's best friend, but Corrine realized she could no longer offer Babbie the job without seeming sly or insincere. "Some people are just skeptics," she said.

Marti and Babbie gave Corrine and Sammie Jo bear hugs, and Babbie told Corrine to call her if they needed anything." Babbie was still waving goodbye when a male voice shouted her name just outside the club.

"Daryl!" Babbie ran toward the black valet and kissed him hard on the lips, not ten feet from Corrine's mother. Corrine turned and chuckled, wishing Sammie Jo

were there to share the moment, but she'd gone to the restroom. Corrine couldn't tell from her mother's facial expression if she was more disturbed that Babbie had kissed a black man or that she had displayed affection in public. Babbie was exactly the kind of person to raise her and Sammie Jo's son but not the one who would.

Her mother waved as cars drained from the parking lot. "She wasn't the one," she said. "You need a proper nanny."

"What?" Corrine asked. How did she know?

"Sammie Jo told Pru," her mother continued, "and you know your sister can't keep her mouth shut."

"Neither can Sammie Jo," Corrine said.

"But she means well." Her mother brushed the jacket, trying to remove what remained. "Leave the jacket with me, and I'll have it cleaned."

The brushing ceased and her mother slid one arm around Corrine's waist and squeezed. It was the most earnest contact between them in years.

Corrine remembered being a young girl, her head in her mother's lap as she lay on a sheet at the beach. "My beautiful girl," her mother would say, "remember who you are," but the person she had become would always be her twentieth birthday, when her father surprised her at her apartment near Tulane. She and Jodi were sleeping in a single bed, the other bed pristine. "Get dressed," he demanded. "I'll wait outside." The next day, Corrine transferred to a dorm with private rooms and an abundance of red, pink, and white roses clamoring in its courtyard. She was certain her father had seen the roses and could only feel they were mocking her. Jodi sent her messages for months, but Corrine told herself she would not spend her life with a woman.

Weeks before the baby shower, she had googled Jodi's name and learned she was married and practicing law in Baton Rouge. It was then Corrine realized how people who had once meant so much to each other could become strangers in no time at all. Yes, she had grown up and remembered who she was, but the beautiful girl and the mother who loved her were gone forever. Tomorrow she would begin researching daycare facilities. Tomorrow she would start again.

She removed the jacket and allowed her mother to take it away.

Ramona Reeves' fiction and essays have appeared in *Ninth Letter's* online edition, *The Southampton Review*, *Pembroke*, *Gris Gris*, *Superstition Review*, *Jabberwock Review* and others. The story published in this issue comes from a recently completed novel of interconnected stories. Originally from Alabama, she currently lives in Texas.